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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTERS OF FINE ART

Suburban Divide
by
Jesse Walp
May 24, 2010

Final Approvals

Chief Advisor

(Please type)

(Signature)

Date:

Associate Advisor

(Please type)

(Signature)

Date:

Associate Advisor

(Please type)

(Signature)

Date:

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Signature of Author: _____ Date: _____

Chief Advisor: Tom Lightfoot

Date: 6/04/2010

Associate Advisor: Elizabeth Kronfield

Date: 6/04/2010

Associate Advisor: Juan Carlos Caballero

Date: 6/14/2010

Department Chair: Don Arday

Date: 6/22/2010

*To my wonderful Bethany, for always
keeping me on track.*

Abstract

This thesis is an examination of barriers in the suburban landscape. Whether they are in between us, or around us, they affect our lives and our relationships with other people. This body of work examines these divisions from multiple perspectives in an attempt to explain what they mean to us all.

Original Thesis Statement

I propose to explore privacy in this very public world. Growing up surrounded by woods led me to believe that home life was secluded and very free. Presently, I find myself in an American suburb with houses very close together and fenced in yards. This contradiction of close proximity and rigid division makes me feel vulnerable and confined. I find myself longing for the comfort and freedom I enjoyed as a child.

Even though we live close together, we look for privacy in different ways and to different degrees. We often build partitions between ourselves, such as fences, walls, and hedges. These play an important part in our lives and our communities, and through close examination of the different sides of these barriers, I will investigate the issues of privacy.

This thesis body of work will engage viewers in a reflection on privacy in the American suburbs. Through the comparison of my childhood in the woods, with my present suburban setting, I will make pieces that explore the ways we separate ourselves from each other. I will be constructing barriers, creating both spaces and divisions, using found fencing and other materials which visually reference the suburban landscape. I will compose these pieces in a way that encourages reflection on the paradoxical situation of the highly populated yet very polarized suburbs.

This work can be seen as an examination of my suburban surroundings. To some this may be just a normal way of life, but it is a place and type of living I am not quite familiar with. I find the situation of a high density of people living directly next to one another a very complex one. The rigid walls and fences thoroughly delineate the property lines and create small, confined, private yards. These divisions between people are of particular interest to me because I feel like they play a largely defining role in the

relationships between people. I look to understand the amount of separation that is needed for people to live directly next to one another, and to understand the different purposes of our barriers.

Growing up without boundaries

Privacy is something that is important to all of us. We separate ourselves in one way or another and to different degrees. Whether we put distance between ourselves, or erect walls, fences, and hedges, we find ways to maintain our privacy. When I compare my suburban setting to my childhood, what I notice is the prevalence of barriers in our lives. They are so common that most people might not even take notice of them. I think I am more aware of them from being raised in rural settings and not really feeling as if I had boundaries at all.



My brother and I picking blackberries behind our house on Alma Hill in New York

I grew up in the woods in rural areas of the eastern United States. Whether it was the wooded mountains of southern New York, or the dense pines of Mississippi, I spent my childhood surrounded by forests. Life in the woods was liberating. Our setting gave me and my family privacy, security, and seclusion. The buffer of trees drowned out most outside noises, and created a great place of play and exploration. We wanted to be, in my Dad's words, "surrounded by nature and in control of our own little world." Many of my ideas were inevitably influenced by my parents and how they lived. My family sought a life free from questions and dependence on others. We built all of the houses we ever lived in, ate a lot of wild plants, canned our own food, had chickens for eggs, and needed very little else to live. For years we had no electricity or running water, so we used kerosene lamps and water from the stream. In Mississippi it can reach stifling temperatures and be very humid, therefore most of the time we would wear very little clothing. I would find myself in just shorts most days and usually without shoes. If we were looking for each other, we would just raise our voices and call across the property. This was our little world. As a child I was oblivious to it all, but as I have grown I have come to better understand my family's lifestyle and our reasons for choosing it. I now see how different that life is from my life today. How we lived would eventually make almost any other setting or way of life far more constraining or confining in comparison.

Suburban Life

I now live in the suburbs and have for almost a decade. I still do not fully understand this way of life or the people who live it. Here I feel uneasy because of the dense concentration of people. I do not understand this contradiction of close proximity and rigid division. In three states, and nine years, I have only had three neighbors that I knew by name, two that I could have a conversation with, and only one has invited me

inside their home. I expected a friendlier place with people outside, kids playing, and neighbors interacting, but the reality of my experiences has been quite different. Naively, my ideas of the suburbs, like many others, were formed by television, with shows like the *Wonder Years*. Now living that life myself, my view is much different. I gaze out of my kitchen window and I see the back yards of about ten different properties.

I know none of the inhabitants and doubt many know each other, even though they are all within a few feet. Everyone's yard is either fenced off or has hedges around it. I think the barriers in a dense community like this, point to the type of people living behind them. I feel that suburbanites are longing for safety and security. It is probably easier to ensure this through the complete separation of their life from others rather than what it takes to earn the complete trust of one another.



WonderYears, TV series 1988-1993

Barriers

“Rather than confronting our complex and often paradoxical condition, we merely construct barriers intent upon protecting anything that still suggests an imagined old order”

-Patrick J. Poulter, Architect

In an attempt to both understand my setting and convey the importance of barriers in our lives, I used them frequently throughout my exploration. I used different types of fences mostly, but also hedges, and even walls as part of my visual vocabulary within this work. Their role in our lives is one which is most complicated. A good example of the ambiguities

of the barrier is the poem *Mending Wall* by Robert Frost. In various ways, Frost describes barriers separating neighbors all while touching on responsibility, tradition, respect, and compliance. “Good fences make good neighbors,” is the phrase spoken by the neighbor to the narrator in the poem. The neighbor thought this phrase to be very true, while the narrator believed it to be something that might have been true in the past, but believes it may be outdated and sees no real need of a wall between their properties. He jokes that his apple trees will never get across, and eat the cones under his neighbor’s pines. It suggests that it takes effort from people on both sides of a wall for a neighbor relationship to work best. It shows that there is some reason to both question long agreed upon ideals, but also some reason for them to still be relevant. I think this poem is a timeless example of both the ambiguity and importance of our barriers.

Fences

Fences are around us all the time. They are common objects that pop up almost everywhere. The character *Wilson* from the TV show *Home Improvement* talks over a fence to his neighbors, yet never reveals to them how he looks. Cartoon characters jump over and run through them. There are chain link fences around our parks, prisons, and businesses. Fences themselves are simple physical structures, but they are extremely complex with historical significance, inherent meaning, and dual function. They close out and at the same time they close in. They make us feel safe and also unwelcome. They



Home Improvement, TV Series 1991-1999

are security boundaries that keep others physically out, but they also limit our own space. People delineate their properties with them, warning others to stay off, and at the same time decisively claiming the property within as their own. Fences give people the peace of mind they need to live very close to others, but they do not foster the neighborliness needed to have a 'picture perfect' community.

Where I live now, I have yet to see a school that does not have a chain link fence completely surrounding it. This weave of steel wire is a very harsh boundary. It does not have any inviting qualities and yet we see it surrounding many of our houses, yards, businesses, parks, and playgrounds. I recently viewed a high school photography exhibit in which the students took pictures of themselves and their friends. Many were taken at the beach, but among the others there were an astounding number of chain link fences in the photographs. Whether they realize it or not, fences play a huge part in the lives of these kids, and have become as common in their communities as sidewalks.



Chain Link Fence

The white picket fence is probably one of the most iconic of all fences. It has grown beyond just a property marker into a symbol synonymous with a certain quality of life. It represents the ideal middle class American Dream. One in which a single family owns a house and a small piece of land surrounded by a picket fence in a neighborhood with other houses like their own. People sometimes describe "a little house with a white picket fence" as the thing they hope to have one day. Its image and the metaphor associated with it have become common knowledge to us. Written in the architectural

codes of the resort town of Seaside, Florida, founded in 1979, was a requirement that every property has a picket fence and they are all painted white. This example shows how important this image is to us, and how we rely on it to signify American culture.



White Picket Fence

Another type of fence worthy of mention is the stockade fence, patterned after actual stockades around forts, made of sharply pointed logs that would keep the enemy at bay. I mention this example because it was by far the most common I noticed during my years in graduate school. I collected them if they were discarded, and removed them from people's property if they let me keep them. They are a modernized remnant of our past. They are no longer as sharp, or made of logs like they used to be, but they still do what they have always done, and that is keep the unwanted out.



Stockade Fence

Sculptural Influences

There are two artists that have significantly influenced this thesis body of work. Conceptually, the architectural sculptor, Siah Armajani is one with whom I am intrigued. His public art sets out to create and perpetuate democratic ideals. The work of Martin Puryear, the sculptor and craftsman, has made a profound impact on me in another way. After seeing his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, I was not only astounded by the size, form, and craftsmanship of his work, but also of his ability to create simple pieces, with such quiet power.

Siah Armajani's work involves people, places, and social ideals. Armajani came to the United States from Iran in the early 1960's, during the Shah's oppressive reign. Seeing for himself the repression of civil rights obviously influenced the content of his work. His dedication to human liberation and democracy lead him to create what he calls "neighborly spaces." Much of Armajani's work looks to democratic principles, which, in his own words, "requires each citizen to participate fully in everyday life and to contribute to public good." Many of his public pieces quite literally bring people together such as bridges, gazeboes, picnic tables, and other meeting areas. I find Armajani's art, which fulfills its goals of unification, to be very successful. What is even more interesting is how his work has changed in more recent years. While before, in a very positive and encouraging way, he created gathering places for people to come together, now in a much more emotional way he has created large scale sculpture that has come to express shame and outrage and question the intentions of our culture. *Fallujah*, a 2006 sculpture of Armajani's is the most powerful I have seen, taking imagery from Picasso's painting *Guernica*, depicting the bombing of Spain in 1937. In a minimal way using glass and wood, he created what looks like a second floor collapsing in on the first

floor, with domestic found objects throughout the piece helping the viewer relate this to their own home. Armajani's work uses place, space, house, and home. These ideas and images coupled with human scale and function help connect the viewer with his sculpture. From this influence, I came to develop my own means of using function and place within my work to create a piece that is recognizable and relatable enough to engage the viewer.



Fallujah, 2006

Martin Puryear, a woodworker and craftsman, has created a lifetime of work in the form of large scale representational and somewhat enigmatic sculpture. With the ambiguity of many of Puryear's pieces, there is still an impressive clarity to the form which allows various individual interpretations. Puryear used exaggerated perspective in his thirty-six foot *Ladder for Booker T.*

Washington (1996) and *Ad Astra* (2007) a cart with the weight of a bolder tipping it back, leaving its handle sixty-three feet in the sky. Its height points to limits, goals, and the struggle to meet them. Martin Puryear's work has helped me in developing my own visual language with representation, ambiguity and exaggeration.



Puryear Installation at the MOMA

Development of the work

My work developed and evolved constantly through this examination as I continually introduced different perspectives from suburbanites and others. The journey started in a very critical way, in which I considered myself an outsider looking at the suburban way of life as baffling and bizarre. I used the suburban imagery I saw in my surroundings coupled with my somewhat naïve perspective, based on clichés, popular culture, and television. With this imagery, I created, divided, and designated spaces. In an attempt to emulate the character of life I saw around me, I referenced both the artificial and the real, being that much of the look of the suburbs is regulated to maintain its harmonious facade. In one piece I made an exaggeratingly tall fence with heavily painted fake grass, while in another I used real grass and found fencing. I worked in a fast paced manner; building and augmenting. I sketched, built models, and made partial pieces. I would take the sculpture to a point and realize that I needed to go back and change an angle, add an element, or use a different material. I enjoyed this way of working and felt that it produced results that were reasoned and calculated. Towards the final few pieces, with my research, critique, conversation, and better understanding, I came to accept my place in the suburbs, and I found the work became more reverent and respectful. I think I began to exhaust my negative sentiments and started to think about the suburbs being the home to millions. I learned to take into account many different perspectives besides my own, and worked hard to leave out any unnecessary information that might clutter or confuse. I feel like this produced pieces that allowed the viewer to come to their own conclusions. The work being large and human scale created somewhat of a neighborhood of suburban artifacts. I believe this encouraged the viewer within to think about their own setting, what it is composed of, and why.

Descriptions of the work

Outside Looking In is the first piece I completed. It creates an interior/exterior relationship within the context of the home. The piece is an L-shaped interior corner of a room with a window and blue vinyl siding defining the exterior. Through the window there is a video playing of a real-life sidewalk and street. I use this play between artificiality and reality to help characterize the suburbs. This piece suggests the fact that people on the outside can look inside, while the people on the inside can look out. I think it makes us aware of our privacy and why we require it. This opens a discussion in a way that looks at it from the inside and the outside. The elements such as the window sill, the blinds, the base molding, the siding, and the paint make it appear as if it was plucked out of everyday life. I wanted the viewer to relate this to his or her own home to see how they feel looking out of the window at people, and at the same time having people look in at them. I think this duality is a common occurrence in a setting where people converge but also seek privacy.

There is also a dual meaning in *Land of the Free*, which represents an exaggeratingly closed off suburban yard. This piece is somewhat of a domestic prison cell, characterized as an uncomfortable, confining, artificial place. A tall, sharp, white picket fence oppressively surrounds a small pristine plastic-like yard which suggests a safe, but unnatural setting. From far off, the sculpture has a bright look and a proud stance, but upon closer examination there is uneasiness in the sharp grass inside the confining cell. The grass being thousands of tiny fence posts, suggests the almost infinite amount of barriers within the suburban landscape.

From here I went on to create a seemingly functional piece laden with contradiction. *Hedge* is a bold physical boundary that does not completely separate. It makes one aware of space by not only dividing, but also uniting, leading us to question

the boundary's role and its necessity. The small hole within the hedge draws a viewer into the piece and leads them through to the other side. This sculpture, being a geometric shaped, artificial hedge, once again points to the synthetic qualities of the suburbs and the illusion of the 'perfect' life. In this piece I think of neighbors and the communication necessary for their relationship. This thick dense mass separates like a wall, and the hole is small enough that it requires one to get very close to see through it. Looking in the hole, a viewer may see another's face, possibly creating a friendly or awkward moment.

Fauxverprotection suggests irrationality to the physical things that surround and define one's property, but at the same time admitting there must be respect for those elements to work. It is the most complex piece, made up of suburban found objects that are rendered functionless by their size and arrangement. A small sidewalk loops around the outside of the piece, enclosing a tiny patch of grass. The patch of grass, suggesting a yard, is filled with fences that enclose other fences. This layering gives the piece a hierarchical ordering, creating a monument and suggesting reverence.



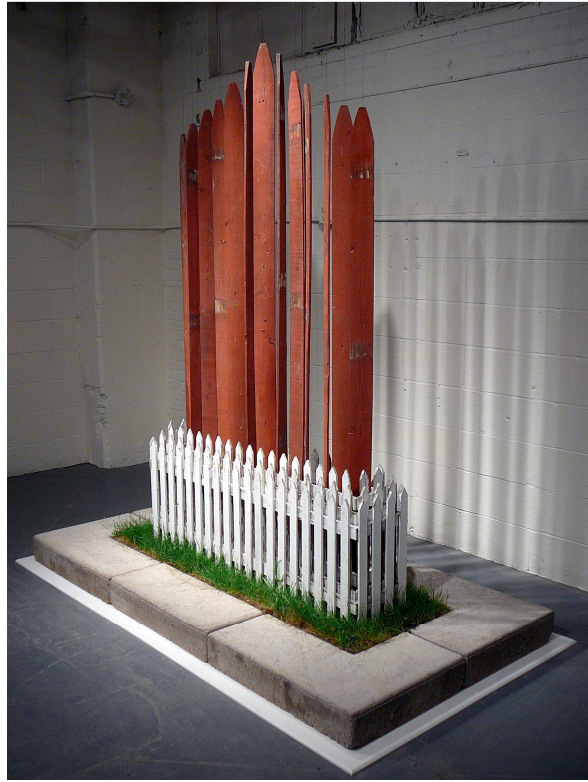
Outside Looking In



Land of the Free



Hedge



Fauxverprotection

Sanctuary is a chain link nest with a small confined space on the inside. It is human sized and may be viewed as a personal space for an individual. This piece, referencing a bird's nest, hangs above the ground giving it protection and safety. Despite these comforting qualities, though, the chain link gives it a very cold sharp feeling especially within the small jagged space on the inside. I believe these contradicting characteristics helped show that security can offer comfort, but also take it away.

Stack is outdoor installation of a large pile of discarded fences in an area of grass. Usually seen between houses and surrounding back yards these fences are recontextualized. The size and variety of the pile suggests that many different yards are represented here. From far off this could be just a pile of trash, but given a closer look they are all fence pieces stacked in a somewhat orderly manner. The parts are not broken, only dismantled and could easily be put back in place. *Stack* asks what would happen if we all removed our fences. For many this may be a threat to their privacy, but to some this could be an opportunity for friendship and unity.



Sanctuary



Stack

What I have accomplished

I think as a whole, the work and installation was very successful. The Canal Street Gallery with its stark white walls, high ceiling, and concrete floor was an ideal exhibition space. The minor things I would have done differently include making the stack of fences taller and possibly situating the hedge in the middle of a space rather than between spaces. Nonetheless, the work became somewhat of a suburban environment surrounding one within hedges, houses, fences, and yards. Whether familiar or not with the suburbs, the viewer may feel included and examine the issues of the situation.



Installation at Canal Street Gallery

Conclusion

During this journey, I discovered imagery, materials and methods of working that became important to me and my approach toward sculpture. The fences, yards, windows, and hedges were recognizable and formally uncluttered. The materials, like the chain link, the concrete, and the wood with their malleability lent themselves well to redefinition. The fake grass mound and the heavily painted hedge were very successful for this investigation, but I feel little connection to them now because of their lack of durability, being made mostly of pink foam insulation. I respond more to the long-lasting materials that people have used for thousands of years such as wood, metal and concrete. I find the scale at which I worked functioned well as actual barriers around the viewers, involving them on a physical level.

This investigation has allowed me to understand what kind of freedoms we often give up to live in this world with so many boundaries. Now, my work focuses more on those liberties, why they are traded, and what comes in return. Using historical references such as crowns, shackles, stockades, and slave collars, I suggest different classes of people and methods of control. As my investigation has expanded the work has become very literal using more universal imagery and materials like wood, steel, and bronze. I still find myself using chain link from time to time, although, I have begun to rust it in order to give it the appearance of age and implied history. I continue to reference functional objects and artifacts, and the work remains at human scale helping to create the physical involvement with the viewer that I find necessary.

Also, throughout this exploration I have come to better understand my childhood, my family, my surroundings, and my neighbors. I have changed my location to yet another suburban lifestyle where the boundaries are even more prominent. Fences, walls, and pristine hedges surround nearly every property. Thankfully, I find myself having

more appreciation now for the fine balance between privacy and separation. I realize that the level of privacy we require separates us from one another, and this separation may be just what we need in order to live together.

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